

HOWELLS REQUIEM

IKEN SCHOLARS
23 NOVEMBER 2018

RUNNING ORDER

FIRST HALF

Herbert Howells (1892-1983): Regina Caeli
Robert Wylkynson (c.1450-c.1515): Salve Regina
Herbert Howells: Salve Regina
Robert Fayrfax (1464-1521): Magnificat 'Regale'

SECOND HALF

Howells – Take him, earth, for cherishing
Howells – Requiem

1. Salvator Mundi
2. Psalm 23 (The Lord is my shepherd)
3. Requiem aeternam (1)
4. Psalm 121 (I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills)
5. Requiem aeternam (2)
6. I heard a voice from heaven

PROGRAMME NOTES

'All my hope on God is founded, He doth still my trust renew'. So runs the familiar opening lines of one of the nation's favourite hymns. The most well-known tune is by Herbert Howells (1892-1983) and it was probably the first of his compositions I encountered as a child. I remember, as an organ student, preparing it for school assemblies and services (it was a favourite of my Head Master). My Head Master wasn't alone: as an adult I have gone on to play it for couples celebrating their weddings; for families christening their children and, indeed, for relatives mourning their loved ones. The text, of course, has a lot to do with its popularity ('Human pride and earthly glory, sword and crown betray his trust' is always my favourite line), but surely the majestic sweep of the melody and the intensity of the harmony beneath are as much, if not more, to do with it. And for that we have Howells to thank. And, I believe, for this reason it has become an enduring addition to the canon of 20th-century English hymns. But why all this talk about a hymn that won't be sung in tonight's concert?

Because the name of the hymn tune is 'Michael'.

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On Easter Day 1916, the 24-year old Howells heard his *Four Anthems of the Blessed Virgin Mary* receive their first performance in the newly-build Westminster Cathedral under Richard Terry (for whom they were composed). Terry was already an important figure in the young composer's musical life: four years earlier, Howells' first professional performance of a composition had also taken place in the cathedral under Terry and the two had been collaborating ever since (along with Stanford, Howells' teacher). More, Terry was a proponent of the early 20th-century revival of 15th- and 16th- century polyphony, and it is possible to detect traces of this influence in Howells' early compositions. This is very clear in the composition of 1912 (his *Mass in the Dorian Mode*), but the echoes are there too in the *Four Anthems*. At least, in the two that survive: these four pieces were not published at the time, and when they did come to be published in 1986 (from a number of handwritten manuscripts at Westminster Cathedral), sadly two had been lost or destroyed.

The *Regina Caeli* is the first of these and this is where we begin our concert tonight. It forms the first of two thematic groups in tonight's programme: that is, the influence of early English polyphony on the style of Howells.

'*Regina Caeli*' is the Marian antiphon for Eastertide, sung in place of the Angelus from Easter Day until Pentecost. The prayer is interspersed with 'alleluias' and from the offset Howells draws our attention to this alternation by contrasting the two halves of this double-choir setting. Notice how the very beginning opens with unison octaves, rising and falling in a manner reminiscent of chant. The piece quickly develops, however, until the whole choir joins forces at 'Resurrexit sicut dixit' ('He has risen as he said').

The *Salve Regina* of Robert Wylkynson (c.1450-c.1515) is one of a huge collection of polyphony prepared for use in the new chapel of Eton College in the latter part of the 15th-century and the early 16th-century. The manuscript that contains this collection has come to be known as the Eton Choirbook, and is one of the great treasures of pre-Reformation polyphony in England. Wylkynson was himself choirmaster at Eton between 1500 and 1515, and we believe he oversaw the compilation of the second of three groups of entries that form the Eton Choirbook. He included nine of his own compositions, though sadly only three survive. His *Salve Regina* is the first of his pieces to survive intact. In nine voices, the richly-illuminated manuscript names each part after a rank of angels: seraphim, cherubim, thrones, dominions, virtues, power, principalities, archangels and angels. Enticingly, on the second opening the second countertenor part is labelled 'Robertus Wylkynson', suggesting to some that this may have been his part. The piece itself (running to 15mins or so in total) contrasts passages for huge joined forces with highly-virtuosic solo sections. There is evidence of continental influences as imitation begins to creep in between the parts, something which is hardly, if ever, seen in the earliest phase of the Eton Choirbook repertoire (for example, the music of Horwood and Banester).

Of course, it is hard to spot direct influences between Wylkynson's *Salve Regina* and Howells' setting of the same name. Nonetheless, it is interesting to note both composers give special place to the passage describing the virtues of Mary: 'O clemens, O pia' ('O clement, O loving'). Howells introduces a soaring soprano solo over sustained chords in the rest of the choir, echoing the unison writing a few bars earlier at 'et Jesum benedictum fructum ventris tui' ('blessed fruit of thy womb, Jesus'), which links the attributions of mother and son, but also compositionally acts as a kind of *cantus firmus*, something Wylkynson and his contemporaries would have recognised.

The final piece of our first half is Fayrfax's monumental *Magnificat 'Regale'*. This piece is not in the Eton Choirbook today, though it once was: only 64 compositions of an original 93 remain though folio losses and damage. The choirbook is primarily a practical book for use in the liturgy and there are various snippets of information against each composition designed to make life easier for the user (such as an indication of the number of notes from the highest to the lowest for each piece and alternating the lyrics of verses in red and black ink to help singers find their place quickly). At the front is a contents section, which does specify a *Magnificat* by Fayrfax (in five voices and 22 notes top to bottom) and in the margin a later (though still 16th-century) hand has annotated 'Regale'. Much like the Wylkynson, Fayrfax's *Magnificat* contrasts full choir sections with virtuosic solo passages. Unlike Wylkynson, however, Fayrfax alternates his polyphonic passages with sections of chant.

If the first half of our concert tonight was about the influence of early polyphony on the style of Howells, our second half picks up the story much later in Howells' life and explores his response to grief: both public and private.

You'll remember the discussion about 'Michael' the hymn tune at the start of these programme notes. This was all because the hymn tune was composed in 1936 a year after the tragic death of Howells' son, Michael, from spinal meningitis at the age of 9. It affected Howells' extremely deeply and the hymn tune became something of a public memorial to the child. By contrast, the *Requiem*, which was largely composed in 1932 but reworked in 1935, was kept from publishing as, in Howells' words, 'a personal, almost secret document' until it was released for performance decades later in 1980.

If Howells' *Requiem* is therefore a 'secret document', his huge *Take him, earth, for cherishing* could not be more public.

'Within the year following the tragic death of President Kennedy in Texas [1963] plans were made for a dual American-Canadian Memorial Service to be held in Washington. I was asked to compose an *a cappella* work for the commemoration. The text was mine to choose, Biblical or other. Choice was settled when I recalled a poem by Prudentius (AD 348–413). I had already set it in its medieval Latin years earlier, as a study for *Hymnus Paradisi*. But now I used none of that unpublished setting. Instead I turned to Helen Waddell's faultless translation [...] Here was the perfect text—the Prudentius 'Hymnus circa exsequias defuncti'.'

Herbert Howells in 1967

Here, then, is a piece designed specifically for public grief. Intriguingly, Howells again returns to the motif of opening, chant-like unison singing just as in the *Regina Caeli* and the *Salve Regina*. But this piece is altogether more complex. The text 'take him, earth, for cherishing' returns again and again (often hidden in middle parts) as a prayer, and around this Howells constructs a winding architecture that is one moment mysterious, the next elated, the third tender. By the close of the piece, the fire spent, the choir returns to homophonic chords and the opening words: thus unity (if not unison) bookends the piece providing a frame for the emotion within.

Finally, Howells' now famous *Requiem*. The piece doesn't follow the standard pattern of prayers for a Requiem service, so probably traces its lineage through other vernacular Requiems such as Brahms' *Ein Deutsches Requiem* of 1868 and Walford-Davies' *A Short Requiem* of 1915.

This is an entirely personal composition for Howells, but the forces demanded for it are large with frequent solos and double-choir sections. The fact the piece is unaccompanied lends an intimacy to the performance and perhaps places it in the line of late-Mediaeval and Renaissance works we have been exploring tonight. There are frequent sections where Howells has carefully imitated speech rhythms ('Yea, though I walk in the valley of the shadow of death' for example). Howells' rich harmonic language is also at play here (watch out for the modality prevalent almost throughout). But he is also testing the bounds of the possible, such as the deliberate placing of two triads on top of each other at 'et lux perpetua' for spine-tingling effect.

'All my hope on God is founded;
he doth still my trust renew.
Me through change and chance he guideth,
only good and only true.
God unknown,
he alone
calls my heart to be his own.'

MJD

CHOIR BIOGRAPHY

Established in 2012, the *Iken Scholars* are a London-based chamber choir dedicated to exploring hidden corners of the Renaissance repertoire. Recent performances at the Cadogan Hall, St John's Smith Square and St Paul's Cathedral have included masses and motets unheard in 400 years, as well as large-scale masterpieces from the central canon. Primarily focused on presenting unusual concerts in the capital, the choir is increasingly in demand in London's cathedrals and further afield. The group is made up of singers from London and close by, and directed by Matthew Dunn. For more information, visit our webpage: www.ikenscholars.co.uk.

Sopranos

Emily Field
Sophie Cleobury
Jenny Forsyth
Katharina Dunn
Nerissa Taysom
Danielle Cahill

Altos

Jess Dagers
Marion Harris
Chris Murphy
Jessica Ballantine

Tenors

Andrew Balls
James Green
Gary Rushton
John Robb
William Wallis

Basses

Chris Jeanes
William Hess
Maxime Rischard
Milo Comerford

Matthew Dunn

Matthew Dunn, director, formed the *Iken Scholars* in 2012 to perform programmes of hidden corners of the canon of Renaissance polyphony. Originally from Manchester, he read music at Cambridge and wrote a master's thesis on the dissemination of French thirteenth-century polyphony in England. He set up the *Iken Scholars* in 2012 after coming to London. He is Organist and Director of Music at the lovely church of All Saints' Blackheath. When not conducting choirs, he has a job in Insurance Strategy for a professional services firm.

TRANSLATIONS

Regina caeli

Regina caeli laetare, alleluia.
Quia quem meruisti portare, alleluia.
Resurrexit sicut dixit, alleluia.
Ora pro nobis Deum, alleluia.

Queen of Heaven, rejoice, alleluia.
For He whom you were worthy to bear, alleluia.
He has risen, as He said, alleluia.
Pray for us to God, alleluia.

Salve regina

Salve regina, mater misericordiae,
vita, dulcedo, et spes nostra, salve!
Ad te clamamus,
exsules filii Euae,
ad te suspiramus, gementes et flentes,
in hac lacrimarum valle.
Eja ergo, advocata nostra,
illos tuos misericordes oculos ad nos converte
et Jesum, benedictum
fructum ventris tui,
nobis, post hoc exilium, ostende,

Hail, Holy Queen, Mother of mercy,
hail our life, our sweetness and our hope!
To thee do we cry,
poor banished children of Eve,
to thee do we send up our sighs,
mourning and weeping in this valley of tears.
Turn, then, most gracious advocate,
thine eyes of mercy toward us,
and after this, our exile,
show unto us the blessed
fruit of thy womb, Jesus.

O clemens, O pia, O dulcis Virgo Maria.

Magnificat

Magnificat, anima mea, Dominum
et exultavit spiritus meus in Deo, salutari meo.
Quia respexit
humilitatem ancillæ suæ:
ecce enim ex hoc beatam
me dicent omnes generationes.
Quia fecit mihi magna, qui potens est,
et sanctum nomen eius,
et misericordia eius a progenie
in progenies timentibus eum.
Fecit potentiam in brachio suo,
dispersit superbos
mente cordis sui.
Deposuit potentes de sede
et exaltavit humiles;
esurientes implevit bonis
et divites dimisit inanes.
Suscepit Israel puerum suum
recordatus misericordiæ suæ,
sicut locutus est ad patres nostros,
Abraham et semini eius in sæcula.
Gloria Patri, et Filio,
et Spiritui Sancto:
Sicut erat in principio, et nunc, et semper,
et in sæcula sæculorum.
Amen.

O clement, O loving, O sweet Virgin Mary.

My soul doth magnify the Lord.
and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour.
Because he hath regarded
the humility of his handmaid:
for behold from henceforth all generations
shall call me blessed.
Because he that is mighty hath done great things
to me: and holy is his name,
and his mercy is from generation unto
generations, to them that fear him.
He hath shewed might in his arm,
he hath scattered the proud
in the conceit of their heart.
He hath put down the mighty from their seat
and hath exalted the humble:
he hath filled the hungry with good things:
and the rich he hath sent empty away.
He hath received Israel his servant,
being mindful of his mercy.
As he spoke to our fathers:
to Abraham and to his seed for ever.
Glory be to the Father, and to the Son,
and to the Holy Ghost:
as it was in the beginning, is now,
and ever shall be, world without end.
Amen.

INTERVAL

Take him, earth, for cherishing

Take him, earth, for cherishing,
to thy tender breast receive him.
Body of a man I bring thee,
noble even in its ruin.

Once was this a spirit's dwelling,
by the breath of God created.
High the heart that here was beating,
Christ the prince of all its living.

Guard him well, the dead I give thee,
not unmindful of his creature
shall he ask it: he who made it
symbol of his mystery.

Comes the hour God hath appointed
to fulfil the hope of men,
then must thou, in very fashion,
what I give, return again.

Not though ancient time decaying
wear away these bones to sand,
ashes that a man might measure
in the hollow of his hand:

Not though wandering winds and idle,
drifting through the empty sky,
scatter dust was nerve and sinew,
is it given to man to die.

Once again the shining road
leads to ample Paradise;
open are the woods again,
that the serpent lost for men

Take, O take him, mighty leader,
take again thy servant's soul.
Grave his name, and pour the fragrant
balm upon the icy stone.

Requiem

Salvator mundi

O saviour of the world, who by thy cross and thy precious blood has redeemed us, save us and help us, we humbly beseech thee, O Lord.

Psalm 23

The Lord is my shepherd: therefore can I lack nothing.

He shall feed me in a green pasture: and lead me forth beside the waters of comfort.

He shall convert my soul: and bring me forth in the paths of righteousness, for his name's sake.

Yea, though I walk in the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: thy rod and thy staff comfort me.

Thou shalt prepare a table before me against them that trouble me: thou hast anointed my head with oil, and my cup shall be full.

But thy loving-kindness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

Requiem aeternam

Requiem aeternam dona eis.

Rest eternal grant unto them.

Et lux perpetua luceat eis.

And may light perpetual shine upon them.

Requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine.

Rest eternal grant unto them, O Lord.

Psalm 121

I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills: from whence cometh my help.

My help cometh even from the Lord: who hath made heaven and earth.

He will not suffer thy foot to be moved: and he that keepeth thee will not sleep.

Behold, he that keepeth Israel: shall neither slumber nor sleep.

The Lord himself is thy keeper: he is thy defence upon thy right hand.

So that the sun shall not burn thee by day: neither the moon by night.

The Lord shall preserve thee from all evil: yea, it is even he that shall keep thy soul.

The Lord shall preserve thy going out, and thy coming in: from this time forth and for evermore

Requiem aeternam

Requiem aeternam dona eis.

Rest eternal grant unto them.

Et lux perpetua luceat eis.

And may light perpetual shine upon them.

Requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine.

Rest eternal grant unto them, O Lord.

I heard a voice from heaven

I heard a voice from heaven saying unto me, Write, from henceforth blessed are the dead which die in the Lord: even so saith the Spirit; for they rest from their labours.